

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 454 003

RC 023 024

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TITLE Mexican-Trained Educators in the United States: Our Assumptions--Their Beliefs.
SPONS AGENCY Kellogg Foundation, Battle Creek, MI.
PUB DATE 2000-02-00
NOTE 29p.; In: National Association of African American Studies & National Association of Hispanic and Latino Studies 2000 Literature Monograph Series. Proceedings (Education Section) (Houston, TX, February 21-26, 2000).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Beliefs; *Bilingual Education; Bilingual Teachers; *Economically Disadvantaged; *Educational Attitudes; Elementary Secondary Education; Failure; Immigrants; Limited English Speaking; Mexican American Education; Mexican Americans; *Minority Group Teachers; Social Attitudes; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Expectations of Students
IDENTIFIERS *Deficit Theory; Texas

ABSTRACT

A study examined the beliefs and attitudes of Mexican-trained educators regarding instruction for minority and language minority students in light of assumptions that students experience better outcomes with culturally and linguistically compatible teachers. Fifteen educators who received their teacher education in Mexico, and whose native language was Spanish, were interviewed. Findings indicate that while these educators understood the philosophy and purpose of bilingual education, were pedagogically prepared, and were both linguistically and culturally compatible with their students, they held some beliefs and perspectives about their students that may be problematic--in fact, as problematic as some beliefs and perspectives of educators from other cultural backgrounds. Specifically, these Mexican-trained educators demonstrated a deficit-model perspective in their beliefs that parents with "blue collar" jobs perpetuated a cycle of poverty and school failure by not encouraging their children to do well in school, that minority students' ethnic culture was a reason for their school failure, and that students and parents were often the determining factor for school success or failure. It cannot be assumed that individuals will not possess deficit perspectives about others of their own ethnic, cultural, or linguistic group. (Contains 24 references.) (TD)

**MEXICAN-TRAINED EDUCATORS IN
THE UNITED STATES:
OUR ASSUMPTIONS – THEIR
BELIEFS**

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Mexican-Trained Educators in the United States: Our Assumptions – Their Beliefs

Abstract

This study examines the beliefs and attitudes held by a cohort of Mexican-trained educators regarding instruction for Mexican American students as expressed through individual interviews. Using a phenomenological approach, we analyzed the responses of these teachers vis-a-vis the theories in the extant literature regarding the education of language minority students in the United States. The data suggest that while there are linguistic and cultural similarities among the teachers and their future students, there also exist significant variations due, in part, to national differences. Results from this study suggest that there is a critical need for the inclusion of formalized instruction on multiculturalism within pre-service and in-service teacher education. The research presented in this paper was supported through the funding of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

Society places strong value upon education, and teachers bear much of the large burden of educating our children. A major challenge that faces educators is the diversity of the student population in their schools. Cultural awareness and knowledge are an integral part of the discussion about teaching minority and language minority students (Bennett, 1995; Shaw, 1993; Garcia, 1995). The

objective of this paper is to report the findings of a preliminary study which sought to examine the beliefs and attitudes held by a cohort of Mexican-trained educators regarding instruction for minority and language minority students and see how those relate to the academic assumptions which purport that students experience better school outcomes when placed in classrooms with culturally- and linguistically-compatible teachers.

Theoretical Framework

The lack of competent, qualified teachers available for hire is a major issue that is faced by school districts with a large number of minority and language minority students (Varisco de Garcia and Garcia, 1996; Hardy, 1998; Maroney, 1998). The fact that the facilitator of knowledge is quite often culturally different and, often times, linguistically inept, compounds the factors that effect the schooling experience for minority students (Merino, Politzer and Ramirez, 1979). “There are credible implications that many bilingual education teachers do not

command the academic Spanish language at a native or near-native level of proficiency”(Guerrero, 1999, p. 10).

It is believed by many that some of these cultural and linguistic challenges that arise in our schools and classrooms can be alleviated by providing minority and linguistic minority children with teachers who are of their same cultural background and/or speak a common first language (Saracho and Spodek, 1995; Reed, 1998). Cárdenas and Cárdenas (1973, p. 31) assert that teachers “who are members of minority groups have the highest propensity for understanding and responding to the characteristics of minority children.”

Because the fact remains that all students can’t be assigned to culturally and linguistically compatible teachers, the other alternative is to impart teachers with multicultural and linguistic awareness in addition to the teaching strategies and classroom practices that they acquire in their teacher education programs (Heath, 1983; Bennett, 1995; Reed, 1998). “Although schools cannot become *multiculturally compatible*, they nevertheless can become *multiculturally sensitive*” (Nieto, 1996, p. 147).

And while attention has been given to the need for multicultural and linguistic awareness in the classroom, it is important to recognize that teachers' attitudes and beliefs about minority students still play a critical role in determining students' performance in the classroom (Telese, 1997; Savignon, 1976). As Saracho and Spodek (1995, p. 156) note, "a teacher's attitudes, values, and competencies with respect to one language and culture may not necessarily transfer to others." While limited, there is an emerging body of research which acknowledges the role of teachers' beliefs in the schooling experience.

Gutiérrez (1980) looked at the attitudes of and towards Spanish-English bilingual students. She recommends that teachers assess their own behavior and then evaluate their attitudes in an effort to work towards eradicating the problems of linguisticism that exist. Telese (1997) examined Hispanic teachers' views on mathematics and how those views affected student learning and performance. This work is unique in that it examines those factors specifically for Hispanic teachers in a Texas school district where 98% of the students are Hispanic. However,

the study focused on the subjects' views of mathematics and not on cultural or linguistic beliefs.

Garcia (1991) attempted to describe teacher effectiveness within four domain areas (knowledge, skills, disposition, and affect) using three case studies. Though he ascertained their beliefs about the benefits of knowing other cultures and languages, his study did not indicate to what degree the success of the case study teachers was attributable to their own awareness of languages or cultures. Schick and Boothe (1995) examined the attitudes of 31 graduate students enrolled in courses required for the English as a Second Language (ESL) endorsement. Their survey revealed no significant differences on the pre- or post-tests by gender, ethnicity, age, experience, or course regarding students' beliefs and attitudes toward multicultural education. Their work poses an important question, but is trivialized by the small sample size and limited ethnic diversity (one Hispanic, one Asian).

Aguirre's 1985 study looked at opinions of bilingual education in two California school districts, including those of 20 Mexican American teachers assigned

to bilingual classrooms and 20 non-Mexican American principals of schools with a bilingual program. His work demonstrates how the opinions and beliefs of school personnel, and even parents, may hinder or contribute to effective teaching and learning. Shin and Krashen (1996) surveyed 794 elementary and secondary teachers in central California about bilingual education to investigate how bilingual education is perceived by teachers. Overall, Shin and Krashen found there was more support for bilingual education among teachers who had more LEP students in class and who were fluent in another language. While the researchers determined the correlation between selected characteristics (special training, years of experience, percent of LEP students in class, and self-rating of proficiency in another language) and teachers' support for bilingual education, there was no consideration of teacher ethnicity in the analysis of survey findings. Nor did Shin and Krashen disaggregate foreign-born bilingual teachers and U.S.-born bilingual teachers.

Beckett (1997) prekindergarten teachers of mixed ethnicities from 52 school districts in Texas to determine

the attitudes and thinking about language minority students. She conducted intergroup comparisons of the survey results between districts with large Hispanic populations (50% or more Hispanic students) and districts with limited Hispanic populations (5 to under 10% Hispanic students). Among her findings are that teachers in districts with large Hispanic populations responded favorably toward bilingualism, but did not strongly support the use of the native language to develop cognitive and academic skills through emergent literacy in school. While Beckett categorizes the teacher respondents by characteristic (i.e., years of prekindergarten teaching experience, ethnicity, degree of second language proficiency, teaching endorsements, etc.), there is no analysis of her survey findings by these characteristics. Nor is there any consideration of whether the teachers are foreign- or U.S.-born.

From the literature reviewed, the role of the teacher's opinion or belief is quite important. Although persuasive, the available literature does not highlight or differentiate the views of teachers born in the United States

versus those born outside of the United States. While similar, the experiences and beliefs of foreign-born and -trained educators may not necessarily be any less problematic than the beliefs of non-minority teachers.

Methodology

In an effort to address the challenge of the bilingual education teacher shortage, the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA), in collaboration with the Mexican and American Solidarity Foundation, developed Project *Alianza*. This is a five-year model teacher preparation and leadership development initiative funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, which began in August 1998. The binational program serves as a model for preparing educators to work in bilingual and bicultural environments, and will enable 200 teachers to become leaders in bilingual and bicultural settings by the end of five years. There are four universities participating in Project *Alianza* which are preparing teacher aides, *normalistas* and undergraduates to teach in U.S. schools. These include: California State University Long Beach,

Southwest Texas State University, the University of Texas—Pan American and the University of Texas at San Antonio. A fifth institution, Arizona State University, is the university partner for the project that will focus on aspects of policy and research as they relate to the project, its goals and proposed outcomes (IDRA, 1998).

Subjects

The data used for study were collected from 15 educators participating in Project *Alianza* at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA). All of the subjects' native language is Spanish, and all are *normalistas* – individuals who received their teacher preparation education at what are called normal schools in Mexico. The units of analysis here are the responses that were given by the respondents during their interview.

Phenomenology

For this study, we used a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is a school of philosophy in which the principal purpose is to study phenomena of human experiences while attempting to suspend all consideration of their objective reality or subjective

association (Grolier Encyclopedia).The phenomenological school of thought is a counter argument to the Cartesian model of scientific theory. Phenomenology does not use theory, deduction, or assumptions from other disciplines (i.e., the natural sciences) to explain phenomena. There are two guiding questions for phenomenology: what is the phenomenon that is experienced and lived by a particular group of individuals, and how is that experience made manifest? We were concerned with the attitudes and beliefs of these *normalistas* about minority and language minority students, and how those attitudes and beliefs are related to the roles of educators.

Data Collection & Analyses

Each participant was interviewed individually by a native or near-native speaker of Spanish. The interviews were conducted entirely in Spanish. The interviews were recorded then transcribed. The interview transcriptions were translated into English. Both the Spanish and English transcripts were used for analysis. A method similar to triangulation was used for this qualitative analysis, wherein one researcher developed content analysis and

interpretation from a translated data set, and then cross-referenced those analyses and interpretations with another researcher's analyses from the original transcribed data set. Consistencies between their analyses served to provide an increased level of assurance regarding the trustworthiness of the analyses contained herein.

We extracted significant statements from the respondents' answers and formulated meanings that would permit us to cluster like responses. After clustering the responses, we examined each cluster in an effort to determine how the expressed beliefs of these educators might be consistent or inconsistent with the academic assumptions about the benefits of minority and language minority educators teaching minority and language minority students.

Findings

Thinking About Bilingual Education

One of the significant things that we found in our analysis of the data is that these educators understood bilingual education – its philosophy and purpose – quite

well without having previously participated in formal bilingual education preparation programs. The *normalistas* were asked three questions which focused specifically on bilingual education. One question focused on the purpose of bilingual education from their individual perspective. Another inquired about their perspective on the role of the native language in bilingual education programs. The third of these questions inquired about their own personal opinions of bilingual education.

The first question in the interview was: “what do you think is the purpose of bilingual education?” Overall, respondents saw bilingual education programs as a tool for fostering: (1) dual language capacity; (2) maintenance of the first language; (3) acquisition of the English language; (4) international relationships and business diplomacy; (5) future opportunities for students (education, jobs) to improve/maintain their quality of life.

Subjects were then asked the question “what is the role of the maternal (native) language within the bilingual program?” Again, their responses proved to be consistent with the literature that supports bilingual education as a

tool for developing literacy and language capacity in two languages. The respondents said that, in a bilingual education program, the native language: (1) is an asset; (2) is valuable; (3) is a foundation for learning – a critical piece; (4) should be maintained.

Next, the subjects were asked to state their own personal opinions about bilingual education (“what do you think about bilingual education?”). While it was expected that their responses might be consistent with their responses to the first question (“what is the purpose of bilingual education?”), this particular question served to offer some additional insight into some beliefs/opinions which may or may not effect their role as Mexican bilingual education teachers in U.S. schools.

Overall, respondents thought that bilingual education: (1) is an important tool for developing literacy in two languages; (2) fosters international communication and diplomacy; (3) provides a structured environment for children to learn English in; (4) fosters biliteracy and biculturalism; (5) validates English *and* the native language. Respondents also felt that bilingual education is

“necessary,” “important,” and “indispensable,” especially in the United States, with the growing number of Hispanics and Latinos in the country.

Colin Baker formulated a taxonomy which looks at the types of bilingual education programs with regard to the “typical type of child,” “language of the classroom,” “societal and educational aim,” and “aim in language outcome.” The programs are categorized by “weak” and “strong” forms on Baker’s taxonomy. All of the “strong” types of programs highlighted by Baker foster bilingualism and biliteracy as the aims in language outcome, and foster pluralism, enrichment and, in some cases, maintenance, as the societal and educational aims. As can be seen from the data summarized above, these educators’ responses regarding bilingual education are consistent with the aims of maintenance, pluralism and enrichment, and bilingualism and biliteracy that Baker cites as being present in strong forms of bilingual education programs.

Thinking About Minority Failure in Schools

Cárdenas and Cárdenas (1973) developed the *Theory of Incompatibilities* to explain some possible

reasons for minority failure in schools in the United States. They define several areas of incompatibility that pose challenges for minority students in school. "The Cárdenas-Cárdenas Theory of Incompatibilities is a tested belief that the failure of [Black, Mexican-American, and economically disadvantaged] children can be attributed to a lack of compatibility between the characteristics of minority children and the characteristics of a typical instructional program" (Cárdenas, 1995, p. 22). In developing this theory, Cárdenas and Cárdenas identified over 40 incompatibilities between the instructional program and the characteristics of the learner, and grouped them into five major areas: *poverty, culture, language, mobility* and *societal perceptions*.

The *normalistas* were asked two questions in an effort to elicit their opinions about minority school success and failure. These questions were: (1) Why do you think that some Mexican American students in Texas are not successful in the academic settings in school, compared with other groups?, and (2) Why do you think that some children who belong to minority groups fail more

frequently than other students in the United States? Many of the responses that the *normalistas* provided to these questions correlate to four of the five major areas of incompatibility defined by Cárdenas and Cárdenas. While the respondents cited factors that are real and pertinent to minority students in U.S. schools, deficit model thinking is evident in some of the perspectives about those issues.

Poverty. Economic factors were cited by some respondents as one of the reasons why Mexican American and other minority students experience more school failure than other students. In some instances, students do not have the financial resources available from home to support their schooling. In others, economic situations at home might require the assistance of the student.

Somewhat related to the discussion of poverty is the dialogue about parents and their role that the respondents introduced to the conversation. Some respondents cited parents as being a role model for students, which in some ways, contributes to why the students do not successfully complete school. The thinking behind these responses is that “children look at their parents as a ‘role model’ and

they know that when they grown up they are going to be workers just like their fathers” (respondent’s translated comments). The deficit model perspective here is that parents with “blue collar” jobs do not encourage and support their children to do well in school, and only perpetuate a cycle of poverty and failure.

Culture and Societal Perceptions. Respondents cited culture as being a critical reason for the failure of minority students in U.S. schools. While some of the reasons that were cited are valid and consistent with the literature, there are also some assumptions that are of deficit model origin. We have combined the areas of *culture* and *societal perceptions*, because some of the respondents’ comments are similar to some of the common and, often times, erroneous assumptions about minorities, especially Mexican Americans.

Conflicting cultures is the primary reason for minority school failure – students and schools aren’t always compatible, making learning difficult, if not impossible. In addition to the direct and persistent incompatibility between students and schools, the students often times

experience a larger conflict between their Mexican or Mexican American culture and the dominant U.S. culture:

- “I believe that it is because in many cases, they do not have a good definition or they do not know which one is their culture. The influence of the family and the values of the family that they have make them feel that they do not belong to any of these groups” (respondent’s translated comments).
- “the impact between two different cultures. The education is very different when they come to this country from a country that has strong values, customs, traditions and culture” (respondent’s translated comments).

It is valid to acknowledge culture as a critical factor that effects education, but as Nieto (1996, p. 137) notes, “while culture may *influence* it does not *determine* who we are.” It is, however, not valid to cite minority students’ ethnic culture as a reason for their school failure.

Some respondents also felt that there were some feelings of self-hatred and self-inadequacy at work in some minority students that caused them to be less successful than their non-minority counterparts. Within this context, there is a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure:

- “What I have been seeing is that some Mexican-Americans are ashamed of their origin, their roots. They feel embarrassed of the traditions of being Mexicans. They don’t want others to mention it. They just want to be called Americans” (respondent’s translated comments).
- “Sometimes because they have a low self-esteem. Since they are minority groups they feel isolated, they feel rejected, and all of that influences them to not develop themselves 100%” (respondent’s translated comments).
- “They feel they are different from the Americans and the Tex-Mex people create their own environment – their own world. They want to be noticed, and unfortunately sometimes we learn during our childhood to be noticed by doing negative things. Thus this group of people gets rejected” (respondent’s translated comments).

Another overarching theme that we found in the responses is lack of motivation. Respondents attributed this lack of motivation to different factors: lack of support and encouragement from the parents, self-hatred and complacency, and lack of role models. Some of their comments include the following:

- “they believe erroneously that the efforts have to come from others and not from

themselves” (respondent’s translated comments).

- “sometimes it is a matter of race since their origin, Mexicans have not been developing the desire of self-improvement” (respondent’s translated comments).
- “if the person wants to be better, wants to learn, and wants to be outstanding, he/she is going to look for the possibilities to do so. But if a person does not have that same interest of being better, that person is going to stay behind” (respondent’s translated comments).

While the respondents did acknowledge the incongruities between the home and school environments as a critical factor in determining student success, much of their discussion focuses on the student and the parents as the determining factor for success or failure. In other words, there is a “blaming the victim” point-of-view that is prevalent in their responses. The other critical factor that was widely cited by respondents was language, which is discussed below.

Language. Respondents cited students’ and parents’ limited English proficiency and the limited Spanish (in this case) proficiency as a major incongruity in

students' schooling experience. In many cases, the incompatibility between the cultures of the school and student extends far beyond the borders of the school. The incompatibility extends to the home. Often times, parents are excluded as partners in their children's education because there is a language barrier that exists between the home and school: "some [of us] are ignorant about the English language. A lot of times, mothers – I am included – do not speak English and we are afraid of asking what to do because we do not speak English" (respondent's translated comments). Also, the push to learn and speak English at school can sometimes introduce additional personal and cultural conflicts for students who live in Spanish-speaking homes: "...the language they learn at home is one and at school is another one" (respondent's translated comments).

Regarding the impact of language in the school setting, respondents cited the lack of appropriate bilingual education programs as another reason for minority student failure. They saw bilingual education as being an important resource for limited-English-proficient students in U.S. schools.

- “I imagine that all the classes are in English in [the upper levels] and if he [the student] has not had a good education using this language, he is not going to be able to have a good development in school” (respondent’s translated comments).
- “children probably suffer from a complex when they start in a new group and they do not know the language. [But] if the child has a bilingual teacher that speaks his/her own language, he/she is going to help that child” (respondent’s translated comments).

Educational Importance of the Study

This study is important because there is an assumption that teachers who come from the same cultural and/or linguistic background of the students that they teach are a better “fit” in the classroom, which leads to more effective teaching and learning: “Teachers who are members of minority groups have the highest propensity for understanding and responding to the characteristics of minority children” (Cárdenas and Cárdenas, 1973, p. 31). Gay (1993) also talks about this lack of “fit” between the cultural systems of schools and diverse groups: “culturally diverse students often have difficulties succeeding in

school because *how* they go about learning is incompatible with school expectations and norms, not because they lack desire, motivation, aspiration, or academic potential.” As she also notes, the fact that the discontinuities that exist happen without deliberate or conscious intent does not mean that they are not significant.

What is important and has emerged from this study is the fact that, while this cohort of educators may be pedagogically prepared and both linguistically- and culturally-compatible with the population of students that they will be teaching in the bilingual classroom, they bring with them some beliefs and perspectives about their students that may be problematic – in fact, as problematic as some of the beliefs and perspectives of educators from other cultural backgrounds. We cannot assume that individuals will not possess deficit perspectives about others who are part of their ethnic, cultural, or linguistic group.

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